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A six-year fight, and little won

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WASHINGTON — On the surface, James Abourezk has gotten pretty much what he has sought from life — a family, law and civil engineering degrees, two years in the U. S. House of Representatives, six years in the U. S. Senate and a lot of laughs.

But Abourezk, a maverick South Dakota Democrat and prairie populist, is not happy with what seems to have been a successful career in public service, a career he ended voluntarily by refusing to stand for re-election to the Senate last year.

"Frankly, I have to be honest with you," he said. "I really don't think I did a thing in the last six years. I don't think I made a bit of difference in the Senate."

When he reached Congress, Abourezk sought out the big targets. Now, days into his retirement from Congress, he looks back and concedes that on almost all counts, "big" won.

"Don't get me wrong," he said in a recent interview as he was preparing to leave office. "I don't regret the last few years and what I've done."

"But the Senate is an institution that resists change. You would need to spend a lifetime here to see things change, to make things happen. And then, you couldn't be sure you made a difference."

He is not bitter. He is just frustrated with the same frustration that marked almost his entire term in the Senate.

In the beginning, he thought one man could make a difference — and quickly.

In November 1973, after only 11 months in the Senate, he confided his plans to retire after one term.

"Six years is enough if you do it right," he said. "I plan to do it right. I think you should get your licks and leave. Open the door for new blood. Six years is enough for anybody."

Doubling reporters suggested that he, like most senators before him,

"You'll know in five years," he said with a laugh.

As it turns out, Abourezk will remain in Washington part of the time. He has opened a law firm with two other attorneys and he will practice both here and in Sioux Falls, S. D.

But he did retire from the Senate.

His disappointments in the field of human rights and foreign policy offer a good example.

In 1973, Abourezk began to offer buckets of amendments to Senate foreign-aid bills. Most of his amendments sought to deny aid to countries violating the human rights of other citizens. Other amendments were aimed at stopping aid programs that were widely abused.

"Hubert Humphrey would beat my ass every time," Abourezk said of the late Minnesota Democrat. "I can't say I actually accomplished anything."

But in 1976, Abourezk won one. Humphrey and the committee canceled the International Police Academy, a training center operated by the State Department and CIA for national police officers and security personnel of other countries.

Abourezk led the fight against the academy by disclosing that it had trained Chile's DINA agents and Iran's SAVAK agents in methods of interrogating, torturing and extracting confessions from dissidents.

The mood of the country was changing, Abourezk said. "Finally, I got Humphrey to put it (cancellation) in the bill. We did close down the academy, but it was really Hubert Humphrey's accepting the inevitable."

With the start of the Carter Administration, human rights became an important plank in American foreign policy. But, Abourezk said, human rights considerations in U. S. foreign policy are still "selectively applied. That hasn't changed."

Abourezk was chairman of a select committee and a Senate subcommittee reviewing American Indian policy and legislation. Born and raised on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota, he was viewed as the Senate representative for all American tribes.

Asked what he believed he accomplished to help the Indians, Abourezk said, in self-deprecation:

"We got the Senate leadership to agree to keep the Indian subcommittee for another two years."